



# Dark Traits And Romantic Outcomes: Examining The Interplay Between Machiavellianism, Relationship Satisfaction, And Emotional Intelligence

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## Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between Machiavellianism and relationship satisfaction, with emotional intelligence examined as a potential moderating variable. A sample of 310 individuals aged 18–40, all in romantic relationships, completed standardized self-report measures. Results showed a significant negative correlation between Machiavellianism and relationship satisfaction, indicating that higher Machiavellian traits are linked to lower romantic fulfilment. Contrary to expectations, emotional intelligence neither correlated significantly with Machiavellianism or relationship satisfaction, nor moderated their relationship. These findings suggest that emotional intelligence alone may not buffer the detrimental effects of Machiavellian tendencies in romantic contexts. Implications for future research and clinical interventions are discussed.

**Keywords:** Machiavellian, Relationship Satisfaction, Emotional Intelligence, dark personality traits, moderating role and romantic relationships.

## Introduction

Machiavellianism, a concept originating from Niccolò Machiavelli's political treatise *The Prince*, has evolved into a psychological construct defined by strategic manipulation, emotional detachment, and a focus on self-interest within interpersonal relationships (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). It is now recognized as a key element of the Dark Triad personality model, alongside narcissism and psychopathy. Individuals high in Machiavellianism often exhibit emotionally distant and instrumental social behaviour, forming relationships not for emotional closeness but for utility and control (Brewer & Abell, 2015). Emotional impairments, such as difficulties in identifying or expressing emotions, may contribute to the development of this trait by enabling individuals to make calculated decisions without emotional interference (Jahangir, Shah, Zhou, Lang, & Wang, 2025). This emotional disengagement often manifests as alexithymia and a diminished internal emotional life, which impairs their ability to empathize and form authentic connections. Furthermore, research suggests that early adverse experiences—particularly maternal rejection and strict parenting—can foster the emergence of Machiavellian tendencies, indicating that environmental influences, rather than conscious choice, may underlie this personality orientation (Ojha, 2007). These individuals tend to thrive in competitive

or hierarchical environments due to their long-term planning, strategic social skills, and low emotional responsiveness.

Relationship satisfaction is a multifaceted and evolving psychological experience, shaped by emotional, interpersonal, and contextual elements. Two prominent contributors are sexual satisfaction and affectionate communication. Fulfilling sexual interactions, especially those marked by open and reciprocal communication, significantly enhance emotional connection and perceived commitment in relationships. For women in cohabiting partnerships, emotional intimacy may carry more weight than sexual gratification alone (Józefacka et al., 2023) (Józefacka, Szpakiewicz, Lech, Guzowski, & Kania, 2025). Likewise, verbal affirmations (e.g., expressing love or reassurance) and non-verbal cues (e.g., hugging or eye contact) help build trust and reinforce emotional bonds, acting as a buffer against stress and conflict (Vasquez, Moss, Harris, & Visconti, 2024). Attachment styles also play a critical role in how partners experience satisfaction. Individuals with secure attachment styles typically report greater contentment, as they are more comfortable with intimacy and effective in articulating emotional needs. Conversely, anxious attachment—characterized by dependency and a fear of abandonment—can cause strain due to excessive reassurance-seeking. Avoidant attachment, marked by emotional distance and a desire for autonomy, often leads to reduced closeness and diminished satisfaction (Molero, Shaver, Fernández, & Recio, 2017). Although longer relationship duration can suggest greater stability, the consistency of emotional responsiveness over time is a better predictor of ongoing satisfaction. Gender also moderates these patterns, with men generally reporting higher satisfaction early in relationships, while women's satisfaction remains more dependent on sustained emotional connection and communication (Józefacka, Szpakiewicz, Lech, Guzowski, & Kania, 2025)

Emotional intelligence (EI)—the capacity to recognize, understand, and manage emotions—plays a pivotal role in relationship satisfaction. Individuals with high EI are adept at empathy, communication, and conflict resolution, fostering trust and intimacy in relationships. Conversely (Williams, 2022), Machiavellianism, characterized by manipulative behaviour and emotional detachment, often undermines these relational qualities. Research indicates that individuals exhibiting high levels of Machiavellianism tend to have lower EI, particularly in areas involving empathy and social competence (Ináncsi, Pilinszki, Paál, & Láng, 2018), this emotional can result in exploitative or controlling behaviours, which erode relationship quality and partner trust (Gudjonsson & Sigurdsson, 2007). Moreover, high-Machiavellian individuals often struggle with emotional disclosure and reciprocity, both crucial for relational stability, making them more prone to conflict and dissatisfaction in intimate partnerships (Miao, Humphrey, Qian, & Pollack, 2018). Moreover, research suggests that Machiavellian traits, when coupled with low emotional intelligence, often lead to unfavourable relational dynamics, such as diminished levels of trust and commitment between partners (Tsimokou, 2021). This underscores the critical role of emotional competencies in fostering relationship stability. In this context, cultivating emotional intelligence not only enhances personal psychological well-being but also acts as a buffer against the interpersonal difficulties frequently linked to manipulative or emotionally detached personality traits.

By examining the interaction between personality traits and emotional competencies, this study seeks to expand the current understanding of how these variables jointly influence relationship quality. The findings could have practical implications, especially in therapeutic and counselling contexts, by offering insight into interventions aimed at enhancing emotional intelligence in individuals exhibiting Machiavellian tendencies. Such interventions may promote healthier relational patterns and improved emotional connectivity, thereby fostering greater relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, the study contributes to the broader discourse on personality and interpersonal functioning, particularly by highlighting the moderating role of Emotional Intelligence in relationships marked by emotional disengagement or manipulation. In sum, this research is not only theoretically relevant to advancing scholarship on personality and relationships but also pragmatically significant in informing psychological practices aimed at improving relational well-being.

## Methodology

### Research Problem:

This study seeks to explore how Machiavellianism relates to satisfaction in romantic relationships, with a particular focus on examining whether Emotional Intelligence influences or alters this relationship.

### Study Objectives:

1. To examine the link between Machiavellian traits and satisfaction in romantic relationships.
2. To analyse the relationship between Machiavellianism and levels of Emotional Intelligence.
3. To explore how Emotional Intelligence is related to Relationship Satisfaction.
4. To determine whether Emotional Intelligence moderates the relationship between Machiavellianism and Relationship Satisfaction.

### Hypotheses:

1. A significant association exists between Machiavellianism and Relationship Satisfaction.
2. Emotional Intelligence is expected to show a significant correlation with Machiavellianism.
3. Emotional Intelligence is anticipated to be significantly associated with Relationship Satisfaction.
4. Emotional Intelligence is proposed to moderate the link between Machiavellianism and Relationship Satisfaction.

### Research Design:

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional, and correlational approach. Data will be gathered through standardized self-report instruments administered at a single point in time. The design aims to explore the interrelationships among Machiavellianism, Emotional Intelligence, and Relationship Satisfaction, while also examining whether Emotional Intelligence serves as a moderating variable in the connection between Machiavellianism and Relationship Satisfaction.

### Sampling:

A sample of 310 individuals aged 18-40 years, currently in romantic relationships (dating, engaged or married), will be recruited using convenience and snowball sampling through online platforms (e.g., academic networks, google forms). Participants will primarily be from India, with efforts made to ensure gender diversity. Inclusion criteria include being within the age range, currently in a relationship, and providing informed consent.

### Variables:

- Independent Variable: Machiavellianism (measured using Mach IV scale)
- Dependent Variable: Relationship Satisfaction (measured using the Relationship Satisfaction Scale)
- Moderator Variable: Emotional Intelligence (measured using the Emotional Intelligence Scale)

### Tools:

- **Machiavellianism** – The Mach IV Scale by Christie and Geis (1970) will be utilized. The scale measures the extent of Machiavellian characteristics in Individuals, that is, in terms of tendencies towards manipulation, deception, and exploitation. It measures how much individuals support

instrumental and self-serving interpersonal behaviours and how much they reflect on their overall Machiavellian orientation.

- **Relationship Satisfaction** – The Relationship Satisfaction Scale will be employed. This scale, usually developed from established measures like the Couples Satisfaction Index or Relationship Assessment Scale, measures the extent to which individuals feel satisfied in their romantic relationships. It captures fundamental domains like emotional connection, quality of communication, and general happiness, giving a real picture of the person's perceived relationship wellbeing.
- **Emotional Intelligence** – Emotional intelligence will be assessed by the Emotional Intelligence Scale (e.g., the scale created by Schutte et al., 1998, or an equivalent validated scale). The instrument measures an individual's capacity to recognize, understand, control, and regulate their own and others' emotions. Within the context of the present research, emotional intelligence has been hypothesized as a potential moderator between Machiavellianism and relationship satisfaction to examine the way emotional ability could affect or mitigate the impact of Machiavellianism on outcomes of romantic relationships.

### Statistical Analysis:

The study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional design and employed parametric statistical methods, as the data met assumptions of normality and continuity. Data were analysed using Jamovi software (Version 2.6). Descriptive statistics—including mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum values—were computed for the variables Machiavellianism, Emotional Intelligence, and Relationship Satisfaction. Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to assess the relationships among these variables. Additionally, a moderation analysis was carried out using a regression framework to determine whether Emotional Intelligence influenced the strength or direction of the relationship between Machiavellianism and Relationship Satisfaction.

### Result

Table 1:

*Mean, Standard Deviation, Minimum and Maximum value for Machiavellianism, Relationship Satisfaction, and Emotional Intelligence*

| Descriptives              | Machiavellianism | Relationship Satisfaction | Emotional Intelligence |
|---------------------------|------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| <b>N</b>                  | 310              | 310                       | 310                    |
| <b>Mean</b>               | 86.4             | 19.6                      | 110                    |
| <b>Standard deviation</b> | 7.92             | 3.57                      | 20.9                   |
| <b>Minimum</b>            | 68               | 7                         | 66                     |
| <b>Maximum</b>            | 114              | 35                        | 140                    |

Table 1 Displays the descriptive statistics for Machiavellianism, Relationship Satisfaction, and Emotional Intelligence among the 310 participants, the mean score for Machiavellianism was 86.4 (SD = 7.92), with scores ranging from 68 to 114, indicating moderately high levels of Machiavellian traits with low variability. Relationship Satisfaction had a mean of 19.6 (SD = 3.57), with scores between 7 and 35, suggesting moderate satisfaction with less variation. Emotional Intelligence showed the highest mean at 110 (SD = 20.9), ranging from 66 to 140, reflecting greater variability in emotional competencies. Overall, the results suggest moderate to high levels of Machiavellianism and Emotional Intelligence, with Emotional Intelligence displaying the widest spread of scores.

Table 2:

*Pearson correlation coefficients among Machiavellianism, Relationship Satisfaction, and Emotional Intelligence*

| Correlation Matrix               |                    | Machiavellianism | Relationship Satisfaction | Emotional Intelligence |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| <b>Machiavellianism</b>          | <b>Pearson's r</b> | —                |                           |                        |
|                                  | <b>df</b>          | —                |                           |                        |
|                                  | <b>p-value</b>     | —                |                           |                        |
| <b>Relationship Satisfaction</b> | <b>Pearson's r</b> | -0.225***        | —                         |                        |
|                                  | <b>df</b>          | 308              | —                         |                        |
|                                  | <b>p-value</b>     | <.001            | —                         |                        |
| <b>Emotional Intelligence</b>    | <b>Pearson's r</b> | 0.066            | 0.065                     | —                      |
|                                  | <b>df</b>          | 308              | 308                       | —                      |
|                                  | <b>p-value</b>     | 0.250            | 0.252                     | —                      |

Table 2 displays the Pearson correlation coefficients among the variables Machiavellianism, Relationship Satisfaction, and Emotional Intelligence. A significant inverse relationship was found between Machiavellianism and Relationship Satisfaction ( $r = -0.225$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that individuals scoring higher in Machiavellian traits are more likely to report lower satisfaction in their romantic relationships. In contrast, no significant correlation emerged between Machiavellianism and Emotional Intelligence ( $r = 0.066$ ,  $p = .250$ ), suggesting a lack of association between these two constructs. Likewise, Emotional Intelligence showed no significant link with Relationship Satisfaction ( $r = 0.065$ ,  $p = .252$ ). Overall, the results highlight that although Machiavellianism negatively impacts relationship satisfaction, Emotional Intelligence does not appear to be substantially related to either variable in this sample.

Table 3:

#### *Moderation Estimates*

|  | Estimate | SE      | Z      | p     |
|--|----------|---------|--------|-------|
| <b>Machiavellianism</b>                          | -0.10288 | 0.02487 | -4.138 | <.001 |
| <b>Emotional Intelligence</b>                    | 0.01384  | 0.00940 | 1.473  | 0.141 |
| <b>Machiavellianism * Emotional Intelligence</b> | 0.00110  | 0.00117 | 0.941  | 0.346 |

Table 3 presents the results of the moderation analysis. Machiavellianism was found to be a strong negative predictor of Relationship Satisfaction (Estimate = -0.10288,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that individuals with higher Machiavellian traits tend to report lower levels of satisfaction in their romantic relationships. Emotional Intelligence, however, did not significantly predict Relationship Satisfaction (Estimate = 0.01384,  $p = .141$ ). Additionally, the interaction effect between Machiavellianism and Emotional Intelligence was not statistically significant (Estimate = 0.00110,  $p = .346$ ), suggesting that Emotional Intelligence does not influence the strength or direction of the relationship between Machiavellianism and Relationship Satisfaction. In other words, variations in Emotional Intelligence did not significantly alter the negative impact of Machiavellianism on relationship satisfaction. These findings highlight that while Machiavellianism consistently undermines relationship satisfaction, Emotional Intelligence does not play a moderating role in this dynamic. The following section will further interpret these results in relation to existing research, explore possible underlying mechanisms, and discuss their relevance for future studies and practical applications.

## Discussion

This study aimed to explore the link between Machiavellianism and Relationship Satisfaction, while also examining whether Emotional Intelligence moderates this relationship. In line with its goals, the research further sought to assess the intercorrelations among Machiavellianism, Emotional Intelligence, and Relationship Satisfaction. A quantitative, cross-sectional, and correlational research design was employed to evaluate these constructs, particularly focusing on the potential moderating role of Emotional Intelligence. The sample consisted of 310 individuals, aged 18 to 40, who were currently in romantic relationships (including those who were dating, engaged, or married). Participants were recruited through both convenience and snowball sampling techniques. Data analysis was conducted using Jamovi software (Version 2.6). Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, and range (minimum and maximum), were calculated for the key variables. Pearson's correlation coefficients were used to explore associations between the variables. In addition, moderation analysis using a regression model was performed to determine if Emotional Intelligence influenced the relationship between Machiavellianism and Relationship Satisfaction. Since the dataset was continuous and normally distributed, parametric tests were applied for analysis.

The descriptive statistics indicated moderately high levels of Machiavellianism and emotional intelligence in the sample, with moderate levels of relationship satisfaction. Notable, emotional intelligence displayed the widest range of variability among participants. These results indicate that although Machiavellian tendencies and emotional skills tended to be high across participants, substantial individual differences existed, especially in emotional intelligence. Consistent with the first hypothesis and supported by previous research (Brewer & Abell, 2017) (Ináncsi, Pilinszki, Paál , & Láng , 2018), Machiavellianism was found to be significantly negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction. Individuals higher in Machiavellian traits tended to report lower levels of satisfaction in their romantic relationships. This finding aligns with past literature, such as (Ináncsi, Pilinszki, Paál , & Láng , 2018), which demonstrated that Machiavellian individuals perceive their partners and relationships more negatively, resulting in greater dissatisfaction.

Contrary to the second hypothesis, Machiavellianism was not significantly correlated with emotional intelligence in this study. This result diverges from prior meta-analytic findings (Miao, Humphrey, Qian, & Pollack, 2019) (Walker, Double, & Birney, 2021) which indicated small but significant negative correlations between Machiavellianism and emotional intelligence. It is possible that the characteristics of the current sample, such as demographic composition or variability in Machiavellian traits, influenced this outcome.

Likewise, the third hypothesis was not validated, as no significant correlation was found between emotional intelligence and relationship satisfaction. This finding diverges from earlier studies, such as (Grover & Furnham, 2022), which indicated that greater emotional intelligence is typically linked to more positive relationship experiences. The absence of a significant connection in this study may suggest that emotional intelligence on its own may not be a direct predictor of relationship satisfaction, and its influence could depend on additional interpersonal or personality-related factors.

Although emotional intelligence (EI) is frequently associated with favourable outcomes in romantic relationships, some empirical findings challenge this assumption by demonstrating little to no significant connection between EI and relationship satisfaction. For example, (Diwan & Himani, 2016) investigated this link among young adult couples and found no meaningful relationship between trait EI and their reported satisfaction levels. Similarly, (Fakorede, 2019) reported a weak and statistically non-significant association, suggesting that elevated emotional intelligence may not inherently enhance romantic fulfilment. Adding to this, (Gilmore, 2021) observed that while EI did hold predictive value, its practical influence was marginal, with factors like one's relationship status having a more substantial effect. These outcomes imply that the role of EI in sustaining relationship satisfaction might be constrained by specific circumstances and could be overshadowed by other interpersonal or situational variables such as emotional communication, attachment patterns, and environmental pressures.

The moderation analysis, which aimed to determine whether emotional intelligence alters the strength or direction of the relationship between Machiavellianism and relationship satisfaction, also produced notable insights. While Machiavellianism was confirmed as a strong negative predictor of relationship satisfaction, emotional intelligence did not moderate this relationship. As a result, the fourth hypothesis was not supported. This suggests that the harmful effects of Machiavellianism on relationship satisfaction remain evident regardless of an individual's emotional intelligence level. These finding challenges earlier studies, such as

(Bianchi, Patthey, Mirkovic, Lemaitre, & Schlegel, 2020), which found that emotional intelligence can buffer the negative effects of Machiavellianism on psychological outcomes. It is possible that emotional intelligence may have a protective effect in contexts where emotional regulation is critical to individual well-being, such as in managing stress or depression. However, the interpersonal dysfunctions inherent in Machiavellianism—such as manipulation, lack of empathy, and cynicism—might be more resistant to mitigation through emotional intelligence alone. Thus, while emotional intelligence can enhance emotional management within relationships, it may not necessarily offset the deeply ingrained negative relational patterns exhibited by Machiavellian individuals.

The findings of this study add to the expanding literature on how personality traits—particularly darker traits like Machiavellianism—affect outcomes in romantic relationships. The results highlight the significant and consistent influence of individual personality traits on relationship satisfaction, even in the absence of strong emotional skillsets. The lack of a moderating effect of emotional intelligence on the link between Machiavellianism and relationship satisfaction suggests that other elements, such as empathy, communication abilities, or trust, may play a more crucial role in lessening the negative impact of Machiavellian tendencies. Future investigations could examine the influence of these variables to offer a deeper understanding of how dark traits and emotional abilities collectively shape romantic relationship dynamics.

These findings support the conclusions of (Kardum, Hudek-Knezevic, Mehić, & Trošelj, 2024), who argued that dark traits like Machiavellianism consistently exert negative influences on relationship functioning, regardless of emotional intelligence or other mitigating factors. This insight could be valuable for relationship counselling and interventions, as it highlights the persistent challenges posed by certain personality traits in maintaining healthy and satisfying relationships.

## **Conclusion**

The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between Machiavellianism and relationship satisfaction, while also evaluating whether emotional intelligence moderates this association. The findings reinforced previous research indicating that individuals high in Machiavellian traits tend to report lower levels of satisfaction in their romantic relationships. This supports the view that characteristics such as manipulation, emotional detachment, and distrust associated with Machiavellianism are detrimental to relational quality.

Contrary to expectations, emotional intelligence neither showed a significant correlation with Machiavellianism nor with relationship satisfaction. Moreover, it did not moderate the negative impact of Machiavellian traits on relational satisfaction. These outcomes challenge commonly held assumptions that emotional intelligence universally enhances interpersonal outcomes or acts as a buffer against the influence of darker personality traits. The implications of these findings are twofold. Theoretically, they suggest that emotional intelligence may not be as robust a predictor of relationship satisfaction as previously believed, and that its effects may depend on specific relational or contextual variables. Practically, these results highlight the need for more comprehensive interventions that consider a wider range of psychological and interpersonal factors beyond emotional intelligence alone—particularly when addressing relational challenges associated with Machiavellian traits.

Future research should explore other potential moderating or mediating variables, such as attachment styles, communication patterns, and situational stressors, to deepen our understanding of how complex personality traits influence relationship outcomes. Such exploration will be vital for developing targeted strategies in counselling and therapy aimed at enhancing relational well-being among individuals with elevated Machiavellian tendencies.

## Limitations and Future Implications

This study has several limitations. The cross-sectional design prevents establishing causal relationships between Machiavellianism, emotional intelligence, and relationship satisfaction, requiring longitudinal research for deeper insights. Self-report questionnaires, though anonymous, may be biased by social desirability and self-perception inaccuracies; incorporating partner reports or behavioural observations in future studies could address this. The sample's demographic limitations also restrict generalizability, and cultural differences in emotional expression and relationship norms may influence results. Additionally, emotional intelligence was measured broadly without exploring its specific subcomponents, such as emotional regulation or perception, which could provide a more detailed understanding of its interaction with dark traits. The findings highlight important implications. The negative relationship between Machiavellianism and relationship satisfaction suggests the need for therapeutic interventions targeting manipulative behaviours rather than solely focusing on emotional competence. The results also contribute to the literature on dark traits, showing that emotional intelligence may offer limited protection against entrenched maladaptive behaviours. Future research should explore moderating variables like trust and attachment styles and employ longitudinal and dyadic designs to further explore the dynamics between these traits. Cross-cultural studies are also needed to enhance the generalizability of these findings across diverse populations and cultural norms.

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